
Lake Michigan Game Fish Life History



Coho Salmon

Common Names: Coho salmon, coho, silver salmon, blueback, sea trout

Scientific Name: *Oncorhynchus kisutch*

Length: 11-26 inches

Weight: 5-12 pounds

State Record: (8/17/75) 24 lbs. 6 oz. from Lake Michigan

Identification: Adults are steel-blue to slightly green on the back, brilliant silver on the sides, and white on the belly. There are small black spots on the back, sides above the lateral line, base of the dorsal fin, and upper half of the caudal fin. Coho differ from the chinook and other salmonids of the Great Lakes by having the inside of their mouth grey or black with their teeth set in white gums, their tail slightly forked with spots on the top half, and having 12-15 rays in their anal fin.

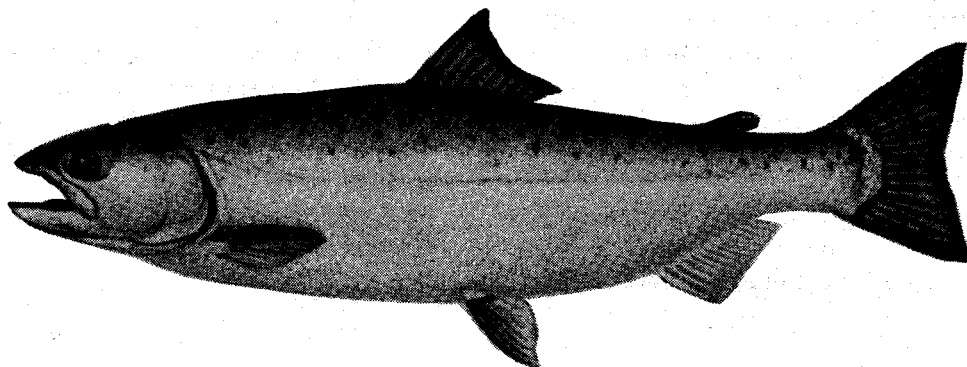
Distribution: Native to the Pacific Coast from southern California to northern Alaska and in Asia south to Japan. Attempts to establish coho salmon in the Great Lakes date back to 1873. These efforts met with little or no success until 1966, when Michigan began planting large numbers of coho. Coho salmon are now found in all of the Great Lakes. In the Wisconsin waters of Lake Michigan, coho salmon are found from Kenosha north to Sturgeon Bay.

Lake Michigan Sport Catch in Wisconsin: 75,000-200,000 per year

Preferred Temperature Range: 54-57°F; 12-14°C

Predators: Adults: Sea lamprey, human

Juveniles: Larger carnivorous fish, birds, and mammals



The coho salmon is an extremely popular game fish found throughout the Great Lakes. It was the primary choice of the Pacific Salmons to be stocked in the extensive Great Lakes rehabilitation program of the 1960's. This fast growing, predatory fish was planted to help reduce the alewife population while also offering trophy angling to Great Lakes fishermen. The results of this stocking program were, and continue to be, excellent. Today, Great Lakes salmon fishing is famous the world over.

The initial source of coho salmon eggs used to stock the Great Lakes came from the States of Washington, Oregon, and Alaska in 1964 and 1965. Since 1969, the eggs have been obtained from mature Lake Michigan salmon. In the autumn, coho eggs are collected by the Michigan DNR at the Platte River, Michigan. Wisconsin obtains eggs from Michigan and transfers them to the Wild Rose and Westfield State Fish Hatcheries. They are incubated for 60 days and hatch in January. After being reared for 13 to 15 months they are stocked during February, March and April along the Lake Michigan shoreline from Sheboygan south. In 1982, the State of Wisconsin stocked over 215,000 coho in Lake Michigan.

Once in the lake, the coho grow rapidly, feeding mainly on alewife and smelt. After less than two years in the lake they mature and begin their autumn spawning migration to the streams in which they were planted. At this time in their life they become darker colored and the male develops a hooked jaw and a slightly humped back. Eggs for the hatcheries are collected during the upstream migration because there is no natural reproduction of cohos in the Lake Michigan tributaries of Wisconsin. Thus, the stocking program is essential to maintain the salmon fishing in Lake Michigan.

Angling for coho begins in mid-April in southern Wisconsin (Kenosha) and moves northward as the season progresses. By far the most successful

method used to catch coho salmon is trolling. This accounts for about 90% of the coho creeled. Favored trolling baits include plugs, spoons, and dodgers with flies. Evening and early morning hours seem to find the fish most active. Pier and shore fishing can also provide some good action, especially casting with a spoon.

As the cohos enter the tributaries, from September through December, they continue to offer excellent angling. Spawn bags, spinners and streamers are the best baits. A special snagging (foul hooking) season is allowed on certain tributary streams of Lake Michigan from October through January as yet another possibility to harvest this valuable resource.

The chemical contaminant PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) was once a severe problem with coho salmon and other large fish of the Great Lakes. Known to be harmful to laboratory animals, PCB is also suspected of being harmful to man. Lately, though, the amount of PCB present in Great Lakes gamefish is showing signs of rapidly diminishing to tolerable levels or below. The contaminants concentrate in the body fats and can be minimized by removing the fatty portions of the fish while cleaning. The skin, strip of fat along the center of the back, and the belly flap should be removed, as well as the dark strip of flesh along the lateral line. By cooking all fish in a manner that removes fat, such as broiling or barbecuing, the PCB levels in the fish flesh can be decreased even more.

Support for the salmon stocking program comes from the Wisconsin angler through purchase of the Great Lakes Salmon and Trout Stamp. The money generated by the sale of this stamp goes directly toward continuation of this successful stocking program. In the future, Wisconsin plans to stock at least 300,000 coho salmon each year. This will help the outstanding coho fishing of the Great Lakes to continue for years to come.